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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [FR](#)
SUBJECT: MEMBER OF PROMINENT FRANCO-ALGERIAN FAMILY
DISCUSSES FRENCH DISCRIMINATION AGAINST ARABS

Classified By: POLITICAL MINISTER COUNSELOR JOSIAH ROSENBLATT,
FOR REASONS 1.4 B/D

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Mehdi Zerhouni, a member of a prominent Franco-Algerian family and a relative of Algerian Interior Minister Yazid Zerhouni, told us July 22 that discrimination in France against young men of Arab extraction remains "a big problem" for the country. While acknowledging that Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy is unpopular among young French citizens of Arab extraction for what they see as his heavy-handed approach to crime in minority neighborhoods and his comments during last fall's riots in some of those neighborhoods, Zerhouni stated that he is sympathetic to Sarkozy's presidential campaign because he believes the Interior Minister will support initiatives similar to affirmative action in the US to help level the playing field for French citizens of Arab extraction while following "the American model" of accepting racial, ethnic, and religious diversity. END SUMMARY.

"DON'T MAKE US SUBMIT OUR PICTURES WITH OUR RESUMES"

¶2. (C) During a July 22 meeting with Poloff, Mehdi Zerhouni, a member of a well-known Franco-Algerian family and a relative of Algerian Interior Minister Yazid Zerhouni, declared that discrimination against young men of Arab extraction is "a big problem" facing France and a "contradiction" in a country that "stresses human rights." "Human rights is important in France," Zerhouni began, "but discrimination, racism against Arabs and Muslims is a big problem. I don't know what can be done to solve it."

¶3. (C) Zerhouni stated that young French Arab men seeking employment face discrimination from employers based on both their Arabic names and features, and he criticized the requirement of many French employers that job seekers submit photographs with their resumes. "If you have a name that seems French, the employer can still look at your picture" to determine whether the applicant is the member of an ethnic minority, Zerhouni explained. "And even if you look European, they might be able to tell from your family name whether you are Arab." He referred to his own light skin and blue eyes, explaining that though his features appear to be European he is often questioned about his Arab name. "People say, 'You don't look like you should have a name like that.'" "Employers don't ask for pictures in the UK, and they shouldn't do it here," he declared.

¶4. (C) Discussing measures that the French Government might take to reduce unemployment in minority neighborhoods, Zerhouni stated that specific measures to level the playing

field for young French Arabs akin to affirmative action in the U.S. may be necessary in France. "Our system is more rigid here. We have aristocrats, bourgeois, things like that. It's not like in America where, if you do good work, someone comes to you and says 'good job' and gives you credit," he explained. While underscoring that this "rigidity" affects all French young people trying to get ahead, Zerhouni stated that its effects are more pronounced for young minorities. He concluded that measures specifically intended to assist young minorities to enter the workforce and succeed are required to improve their employment prospects.

POLICE HARASS YOUNG ARAB MEN WITH REQUESTS FOR PAPERS

15. (C) Zerhouni also blasted the tactics used by the French police in their interaction with young Arab men, stating that police officers sometimes single out young Arabs walking on the street and ask them for their identification papers. He said that police officers use the requests for papers as a means of harassing young men they would like to keep out of certain neighborhoods. "There is no reason to do this. You can't do this in other countries, but in France the police are allowed to ask for papers. If they asked me for my papers, I would make them tell me why," he declared.

SARKOZY MAY BE BEST BET FOR FRENCH ARABS

16. (C) While acknowledging that Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy is unpopular among young people of Arab extraction for what they see as his heavy-handed approach to crime in minority neighborhoods and comments he made during last fall's riots in some of those neighborhoods, Zerhouni stated that he is sympathetic to Sarkozy's presidential campaign because he believes the Interior Minister will support initiatives similar to affirmative action in the U.S. to help level the playing field for French Arabs. Referring to Sarkozy's immigrant roots, Zerhouni described Sarkozy as "a new man, different from the other politicians." "I think Sarkozy will change things. For example, he has already said that if he is president, the police will not be able to ask anyone for their papers unless they have a reason," he declared. Describing the "American model" as one that accepts and celebrates racial, ethnic, and religious diversity, Zerhouni added that "Sarkozy is the one who might apply the American model here."

17. (C) Referring to himself as Muslim, Zerhouni stressed that he has a progressive approach to religion, which he claimed is common among French Muslims. Nursing a Corona beer, Zerhouni stated that Islam is "France's second religion." He stated that French Muslims are having an impact on the French political system, naming France's reluctance to support the American invasion of Iraq as an example. "I really think one of the main reasons France did not help the U.S. in Iraq is that the government didn't want to make Muslims here angry," he stated. Despite this impact, he concluded that France has not yet fully accepted its minority populations. "In America, you can be a Muslim with dark skin and hair, but if you say you are an American, a regular (white) American guy will accept you as an American. It's not like that in France. They think you are not totally French."

18. (C) BIONOTE. The Zerhouni name is widely recognized among Algerians. Mehdi Zerhouni is related to Algerian Interior Minister and former Ambassador to the U.S. Yazid Zerhouni. Mehdi, who was born and raised in France, is in his 30s. His parents currently live in Montreal, Canada where his father works for a multinational company. He and his wife, Karima, have a three-year-old daughter. He works for a private school that educates journalists. Mehdi speaks English and Arabic, though he described his Arabic as "the Arabic of the street" and explained he does not understand formal Arabic very well. He has spent significant time in the U.S., including one year at the home of his uncle, Director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Dr. Elias Zerhouni, in Maryland.

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